

BLIND SWORDSMEN

Lindheim, Burton

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BLIND SWORDSMEN

By BURTON LINDHEIM

YOU have to see it to believe it. Six fencing bouts are on in the salle d'armes of the Foils Club in New York City. Six pairs of "duelists," men, women and mixed, wearing masks and white fencing jackets, thrust, lunge, parry and riposte. Blades flash and ring. "Pick them out," Alexander Hern, maitre d'armes, says proudly. And you can't do it. Out of the twelve fencers you can't pick the two who are blind.

Mr. Hern points. Surely not the young man who shouts "Eh, la!" as he beats aside the blade of that young woman with such mock ferocity, making touch after touch with almost histrionic verve? Nor that youth thrusting and lunging with such grace and precision against a master who is not always able to parry? But yes. Mr. Hern explains. "Fencing today is at such lightning speed that the hand is literally quicker than the eye, and the modern foilsman must depend on his sense of touch. Naturally, the sense of touch is more highly developed in the blind, and, through contact with the opposing blade, they perceive and even anticipate the strokes of an adversary."

"But what do they do when they lose the opposing blade?"

"Taught to take the offensive always, they immediately attack. Their attack contains the defense against a logical counter-attack and is too fast for the slower, irrational counter-attack."

Mr. Hern began teaching the art of the foil to five blind young men at the Community Center of the New York Guild for the Jewish Blind six months ago.

None is a master yet, for it takes at least two years to make a finished fencer. But they more than hold their own with swordsmen who can see and are of comparable experience. And the guild, which agreed skeptically at first to the experiment, now plans to expand its fencing program for the blind.

The blind foilsmen themselves are enthusiastic. One of them, Anthony Oliver, a Brooklyn College student, who also wrestles, swims and skates, said, "Fencing opens up a new avenue of physical recreation for the blind."

"It is one of the few sports, like wrestling, in which the blind can be in direct contact with a competitor. Unlike wrestling, none, not excepting the blind, can get hurt. It is particularly valuable for the timid blind, who are likely to be

hesitant and awkward in their movements, giving them grace and sureness."

The same procedure is followed with the blind as with other pupils, except that special fencing strips, half the regulation three-foot width, are used to guide them at the Community Center. But so excellent is their sense of direction that at the Foils Club, which has a linoleum covered floor, they dispense with mats entirely.

It was expected that the blind would learn more slowly than those who see. But after Mr. Hern had overcome their initial skepticism, he found that, because of their higher degree of concentration, their progress was more rapid.

"But doesn't blindness handicap a fencer?"

"Unlike sighted fencers," Mr. Hern answered, "the blind can't correct slight faults after launching an attack, as, for instance, slightly changing the direction of a misdirected lunge. Therefore they must achieve flawless form and perfect technique, thus replacing a weakness with a source of strength."

"Nor can they see the exact distance of an adversary or whether he is advancing or retreating. But where a seeing fencer might retreat when an opponent rushes in, the blind swordsman stands his ground and takes the more advantageous offensive."

MR. HERN got the idea of teaching the visionless about ten months ago when he first blindfolded sighted students and found this an effective means of instruction.

"How does it feel to fence blindfolded?"

"It's exhilarating," Mr. Hern replied. "It makes you aware of your own coordination, skill and control of your opponent. The fencer with eyes open is more likely to be aware of his opponent's skill and the difficulty of beating him."

A young native New Yorker, Mr. Hern calls his system of fencing the American school to distinguish it from the traditional French and Italian schools in which, he declares, eyesight is indispensable.

The new departure is that in the basic beat-lunge attack the beat is made by striking with the foible or light tip of the foil the forte or heavy upper part of the opposing foil, contrary to the classic principle of using the forte to deflect the opposing foible.

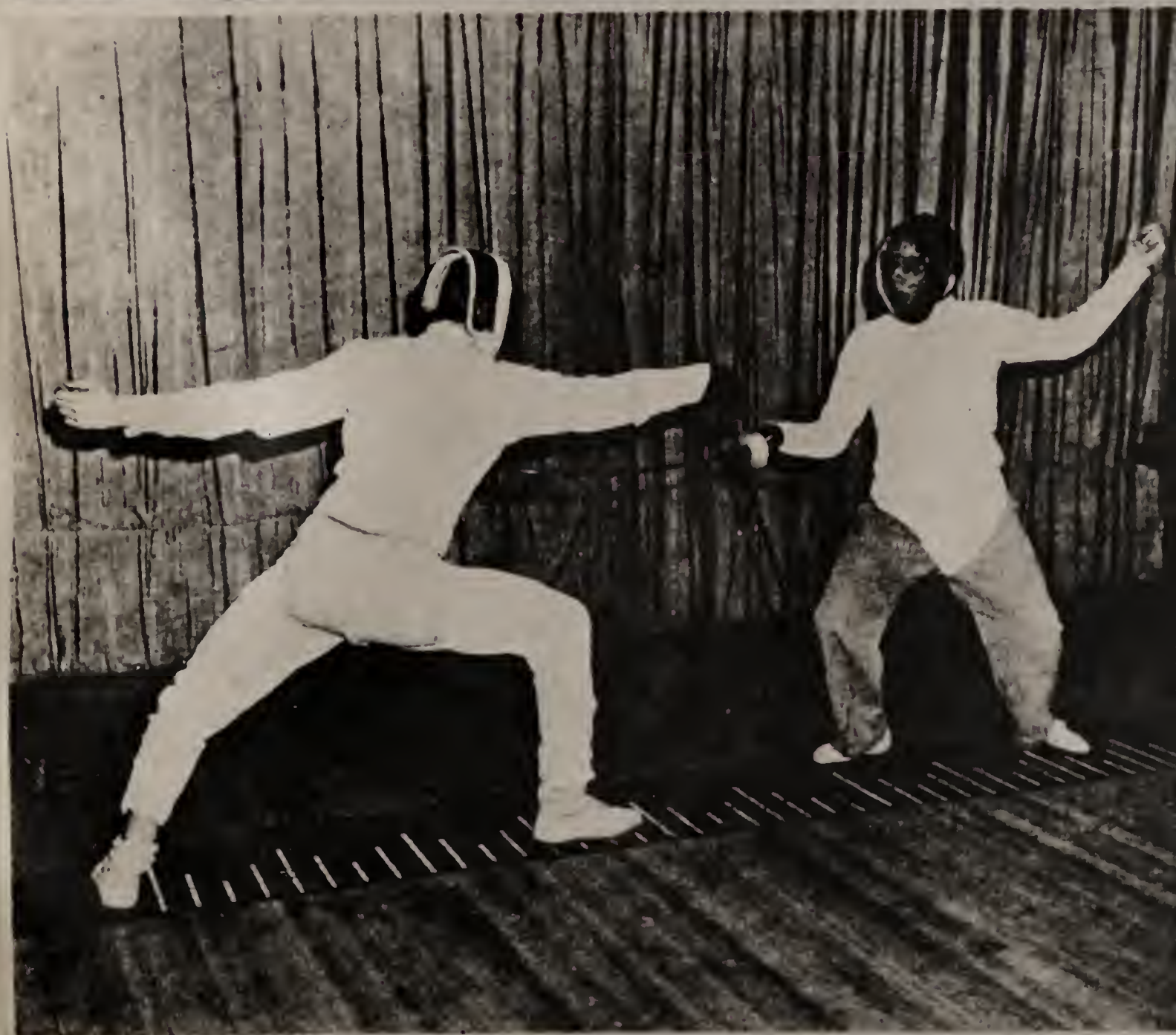
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You can't spot the difference in their fencing—a blind swordsman (right) duels with a champion who sees.

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